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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 001318

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KDEM NI

SUBJECT: GET LALONG, LITTLE DOGIES: PLATEAU SPEAKER
"WANTED" BY POLICE

REF: A. ABUJA 1279 AND PREVIOUS

1B. ABUJA 1277

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR RUSSELL J. HANKS FOR REASONS
1.5 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. On July 26, the Plateau State police commissioner declared that suspended Plateau State Assembly Speaker Simon B. Lalong was wanted for interrogation. Lalong, on a trip to London for medical treatment, returned to Nigeria on July 28, where he told Poloffs that he expected to be "detained" indefinitely in order to stop the lawsuit against the Assembly's suspension from going forward. End summary.

12. (C) Poloffs met with suspended Plateau State Assembly Speaker Simon B. Lalong on July 28, shortly after his abrupt return from a medical trip to London, in his room in an out-of-the-way, very-low-budget Abuja motel. Lalong told Poloffs that he had just arrived in Abuja that morning and was keeping a low profile while waiting for his legal team to arrive from Jos. He had cut his trip short when friends in Nigeria e-mailed him to tell him that police announced he was wanted.

13. (U) On July 26, the Plateau State police commissioner had declared that Lalong was wanted for interrogation. The commissioner's remarks were cryptic: "I can't tell you what I want to see him for. If I do, I am letting the cat out of the bag." Media reports linked the commissioner's comments with the alleged killings of eight people in Yelwa-Shendam, site of the May 2004 communal violence that claimed hundreds of lives (reftel A). Lalong is a native of nearby Shendam.

14. (C) Lalong told Poloffs that the police announcement was a ploy by Plateau State Sole Administrator M. Chris Alli to derail two lawsuits, one before the Supreme Court, the other before the Abuja High Court (reftel B). The Abuja High Court case is scheduled to be heard July 29. Both suits were filed by the suspended members of the Plateau State Assembly to contest their suspension under the State of Emergency (SOE). Lalong speculated that if he were imprisoned or killed, enough other Assembly members would withdraw from the lawsuits for them to be dropped. He said there was no reason for the police commissioner to make a public announcement that Lalong's whereabouts were unknown, since his police surveillance detail had followed him to the airport the previous week, and "everyone" knew he was going to London for medical treatment.

15. (C) Lalong said he feared for his safety, which is why he was keeping a low profile in the Abuja motel until his lawyers arrived in Abuja from Jos. He promised to request that his legal team keep Poloff updated of his status. Post will continue to monitor and report.

16. (C) Comment. The SOE has not been a political failure for President Obasanjo so far, but if the Assembly's legal challenges succeed, he may lose his grip on Plateau State politics. Both the President and Alli have an incentive for helping the lawsuits disappear, possibly by making Lalong disappear. If Lalong is detained, regular Embassy inquiries about his status may be--literally--a lifeline for him. End Comment.
CAMPBELL